

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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USIA-06 OMB-01 IO-13 /085 W
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R 181530Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WAHSDC 6930
INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USUN 798
AMEMBASSY LONDON

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 0998

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, SY
SUBJ: ASSAD GAINS LITTLE FROM PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM

1. SUMMARY: THE RESULTS OF THE FEBRUARY 8 PRESIDENTIAL
REFERENDUM HIGHLIGHT THE MUTUAL DEPENDENCY OF THE VARIOUS
PILLARS OF ASSAD'S REGIME. THE BAATH PARTY IS INEFFECTUAL
WITHOUT ASSAD; ASSAD NEEDS THE BAATH TO ORGANIZE A PEOPLE WHO
SWING FROM APATHY TO RESTLESSNESS. BOTH
THE BAATH AND THE PRESIDENT MUST RELY ON THE SECURITY APPARATUS.
THE VOTERS WERE NOT INSPIRED BY ASSAD'S POLICIES AND
ALTHOUGH THEY RETAIN A FAVORABLE IMAGE OF THE MAN, THEY DID NOT
GIVE HIM THE BACKING HE WOULD NEED TO XHKCLPO
DOWNGRADE THE BAATHE PARTY'S ROLE IN DECISION MAKING.
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THUS, ASSAD IS LIKELY TO REMAIN CAUTIOUSLY PARGMATIC
IN HIS APPROACH TO BOTH DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICIES. THE
OUTLOOD IS FOR MORE OF THE SAME. END SUMMARY.

2. THE SYRIAN REGIME INVESTED MAJOR HUMAN AND FINANCIAL
RESOURACES IN GENERATING POPULAR SUPPORT DURING THE FEBRUARY 8
VMZWLJENTIAL REFERENDUM. THE PRESIDENT NO DOUBT HOPED FOR

A RESOUNDING AFFIRMATION OF HIMSELF AND HIS POLICIES WHICH HE COULD USE TO GOOD ADVANTAGE IN THE MONTHS AHEAD BOTH DOMESTICALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY. ASSAD'S SECURITY ANALYSTS HAVE NOW HAD TIME TO REVIEW THE RESULTS OF THE RECENT PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM AND REFER THEIR CONCLUSIONS TO HIM. THERE ARE SEVERAL ASPECTS OF THE RESULTS WHICH WILL AFFECT HIS APPROACH TO SYRIA'S PROBLEMS:

A. PERCENT OF THE VOTE:

IT IS GENERALLY AGREED THAT A LITTLE OVER ONE MILLION VOTERS WENT TO THE POLLS TO SAY "YES" TO PRESIDENT HAFEZ AL-ASSAD. THIS REPRESENTS ABOUT 25 PERCENT OF THE ELIGIBLE VOTERS AND IS AN IMPROVEMENT OVER THE AUGUST PEOPLE'S COUNCIL SHOWING OF ABOUT TEN PERCENT PARTICIPATION. A 25 PERCENT TURNOUT IS A RESPECTABLE SHOWING IN THE SYRIAN CONTEXT BUT IS HARDLY A RINGING DECLARATION OF SUPPORT FOR ASSAD'S REGIME. THE PRESIDENT MUST CONTRAST THIS PERFORMANCE TO HIS 1971 ELECTION WHEN A LARGE MAJORITY OF SYRIANS GENUINELY SUPPORTED HIM. THIS SIGNIFICANT EROSION IN SUPPORT IS PROBABLY ATTRIB-

UTABLE TO THE FACT THAT SEVEN YEARS OF ASSAD'S RULE HAVE DIMMED THE PEOPLE'S MEMORY OF THE REPRESSIVE REGIME WHICH PRECEDED HIM AND RAISED EXPECTATIONS BEYOND SYRIAN GOVERNMENT'S ABILITY TO FULFILL THEM.)'

B. CONFSSIONAL STRAINS:

WE UNDERSTAND THAT THERE WAS CONSIDERABLE SUPPORT FOR
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THE PRESIDENT WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN AND ALAWITE COMMUNITIES. OVER 80 PERCENT OF THE PEOPLE IN LATAKIA WENT TO THE POLLS VOLUNTARILY AND WE HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT A SIMILAR RESPONSE WAS REGISTERED AMONG MINORITY SECTS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. SUNNI SUPPORT WAS LIMITED AND MANY OF THE SUNNIS WHO DID VOTE FOR ASSAD WERE FORCED TO DO SO. SMALL BOMBS WENT OFF IN ALEPPO ON ELECTION DAY AND TWO DAYS THEREAFTER. THREE BOMBS WERE EXPLODED IN DAMASCUS AND WE HAVE HEARD OF UNVERIFIED INCIDENTS IN OTHER MUSLIM AREAS OF SYRIA. THE ATTACKS WERE PROBABLY INSTIGATED BY THE IRAQIS IN VIEW OF THE BREAKDOWN IN SYRO-IRAQI RECONCILIATION EFFORTS, BUT THE ACTUAL PERPETRATORS ARE THOUGHT TO BE MEMBERS OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD.

C. PARTY ORGANIZATION:

IN COMPARISON TO THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL ELECTION THE BATATH PARTY WAS WELL-ORGANIZED TO GET THE VOTE OUT FOR THE PRESIDENT. THE PRIMARY BURDEN FELL ON SYRIA'S RELATIVELY NEW YOUTH ORGANISATIONS WHICH RESPONDED WELL TO THE CHALLENGE. PARTY EFFORTS AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL WERE OFTEN HAM-HANDED AND IN MANY CASES CAUSED A NEGATIVE REACTION TO THE POINT WHERE SOME VOTERS WHO HAD SUPPORTED ASSAD REFUSED TO DO SO. NEVERTHELESS, THE FACT REMAINS THAT THE BULK OF THE PRO-ASSAD

VOTE WAS GENERATED BY BAATH PARTY DOMINATED ORGANIZATIONS,
BACKED BY THE FULL SUPPORT OF THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR
WITHOUT THIS ORGANIZED VOTE THE TURNOUT WOULD HAVE BEEN DISASTERSLY LOW.
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D. FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC POLICIES:
THREE THEMES WERE HIGHLIGHTED IN THE REFERENDUM
CAMPAIGN: 1) ASSAD'S STEADFASTNESS ON BEHALF OF THE ARAB
CAUSE AND HIS ASSISTANCE TO QUELL THE DISTURBANCES IN LEBANON;
2) THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS SYRIAN INDIVIDUALS HAVE
ATTAINED DURING THE SEVEN YEARS OF ASSAD'S RULE; AND 3)
ASSAD THE MAN AS A CHARISMATIC LEADER INsofar AS WE CAN
TELL THE FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC CAMPAIGN STIMULATED NEITHER
ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT NOR SERIOUS OPPOSITION. WE BELIEVE
THAT ASSAD PERSONALLY RAN AHEAD OF HIS POLICIES IN GENERATING
POPULAR SUPPORT. THIS IS IN PART DUE TO HIS IMAGE AS A
SYMPATHETIC LEADER AND IN PART TO A FEAR THAT ANYONE WHO
MIGHT REPLACE HIM WOULD BE A GREATER BURDEN TO SYRIA. SINCE
SADAT'S INITIATIVE HAD BEEN WIDELY JUDGED A FAILURE BY SYRIANS
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BY THE TIME OF THE REFERENDUM, ASSAD'S FIRM OPPOSITION TO IT DID NOT HURT HIM AND INDEED PROBABLY SERVED AS A MILD PLUS IN HIS FAVOR.

3. BASED ON THESE FINDINGS, ASSAD MUST CONCLUDE THAT WHILE HE IS MORE POPULAR THAN THE BAATH PARTY HE STILL HAS TO DEPEND UPON THE PARTY ORGANIZATION TO GENERATE SUPPORT AND IMPLEMENT HIS POLICIES. HE CAN SEEK TO IMPROVE THE BAATH IMAGE AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS BUT HE PROBABLY CANNOT RITE THE PARTY OUT OF THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS OR FUNDAMENTALLY REDIRECT ITS KUEW OF EVENTS BY MAJOR PERSONNEL CHANGES. IN FACT, NAJI JAMSL HAS TOLD A RELIABLE SOURCE THERE WOULD BE NO MAJOR PERSONNEL CHANGES IN THE PARTY OR GOVERNMENT FOR THE FORSEEABLE FUTURE. IT IS EQUALLY CLEAR THAT THE BAATHI ORGANIZED SECTOR OF THE COUNTRY IS MORE RESPONSIVE TO ASSAD'S LEADERSHIP, DUE PARTLY TO VESTED INTEREST AND PARTLY TO COERCION, AUI SRPE PRIVATE SECTOR. THIS WILL BE A STRONG ARGUMENT IN THE HANDS OF THOSE BAATHI IDEOLOGISTS WHO OPPOSE ANY FURTHER DEREGULATION OF THE STATE. THEY WILL BE ABLE TO POINT TO THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE INCREASINGLY WELL-ORGANIZED YOUTH MOVEMENTS EVIDENCE FOR EXPANDING THIS TYPE OF ACTIVITY.

5. ASSAD WILL BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE CONFESSIONAL NATURE OF THE VOTE, PARTICULARLY IN VIEW OF HIS INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON, WHICH PUTS SYRIA IN THE MIDDLE OF SECTORAL STRIFE. HE WILL BE REINFORCED IN HIS CONCLUSION THAT THE PERVASIVE SECURITY APPARATUS REMAINS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF HIS RULE. SINCE HE MUST CONTINUE TO RELY ON THE BAATH AND HIS ALAWITE DOMINATED SECURITY APPARATUS, HE CAN DO LITTLE TO REMOVE THE IRRITANTS OF HIS REGIME WHICH
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REINFORCE ORTHODOX SUNNI ANIMOSITY TOWARD HIS LEADERSHIP.

6. THE RELATIVE INDIFFERENCE OF THE SYRIAN VOTERS TO ASSAD'S FOREIGN POLICY AND DOMESTRIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS WILL STRENGTHEN HIS INCLINATION TO RELY ON A SMALL NUMBER OF ADVISORS RATHER THAN TO BE OVERLY CONCERNED WITH POPULAR OPINION, THE VOTERS HAVE IMPOSED NO NEW CONSTRAINTS ON ASSAD BUT NEIGHER HAVE THEY GIVEN HIM A MANDATE FOR MAJOR REVISIONS OF THE POLITICLA OUTLOOK OF

THE REGIME.

7. THE BASIC MESSAGE FOR ASSAD IS LIKELY TO BE THAT HIS
NATURAL INCLINATION FOR CAUTIOUS PRAGMATISM IS THE
BEST WAY TO ENSURE HIS COUNTRY'S GROWTH AND HIS REGIME'S
STABILITY. HE HAS LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO CONTINUE HIS
EFFORTS TO PLAY OFF COMPETING ELEMENTS OF THE SYRIAN
SOCIETY AGAINST ONE ANOTHER AND THEREBY MAINTAIN AN UNEASY
BUT RELATIVELY STABLE BALANCE. IN SHORT, THE OUTLOOK FOR
SYRIA IS MORE OF THE SAME OVER THE COMING MONTHS.
MURPHY

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